

Monique Hageman

Van: Research
Onderwerp: FW: your request with refno. ATR-006857
Bijlagen: ATR-006857 Art Historical Report.pdf; ATR-006857 letter.pdf

Van: Research <Research@vangoghmuseum.nl>
Verzonden: vrijdag 13 augustus 2021 10:01
Aan: spivar67@gmail.com
CC: Research <Research@vangoghmuseum.nl>
Onderwerp: your request with refno. ATR-006857

Dear Mr. Pivar,

Please see attached the correspondence regarding your request with reference number ATR-006857.

With kind regards,
Collections and Research



Van Gogh Museum
PO Box 75366
1070 AJ Amsterdam
The Netherlands

research@vangoghmuseum.nl
<http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl>



Mr. S. Pivar
15 West 67th Street
Apt. 4FW
NEW YORK, NY 10023
U.S.A.

Visting address
Gabriël Metsustraat 8
1071 EA Amsterdam

Date
13 August 2021

Reference
ATR-006857

Subject
Request for authentication

Dear Mr. Pivar,

With reference to the *General Terms and Conditions for Authentication* and the *Privacy Declaration* set out on our website and in the digital authentication request dated 14 May 2021, I hereby inform you of the following.

In his *Scholarly opinion* on your 'newly re-discovered painting attributed to Vincent van Gogh' (dated 30 April 2021), Dr. Michael P. Mezzatesta suggests that the painting *Auvers* should despite his own attribution be visually inspected and closely examined 'by qualified professionals in a museum setting.' Although you have asked us to give our opinion on his qualification of the work as authentic, we do not believe that an inspection *in situ* in our museum is necessary. In our opinion it is evidently clear from the material presented to us, that the painting *Auvers* cannot be attributed to Vincent van Gogh (please see the attached report with our considerations).

Normally your painting would fall in the category of works we do not fully comment upon after having reviewed the photographic images and general documentation. It is not unusual in the professional field of Art History to assess an attribution on the basis of photographs and historical documentation alone, and the Van Gogh Museum agrees with this generally accepted practice. In this case the rejected work is in our opinion stylistically, iconographically or technically (or a combination thereof) clearly too far removed from Van Gogh's own work that research and further discussion is deemed pointless.

In your case we decided to explain our opinion, because of all the attention already generated at forehand by the public presentation of the painting as a re-discovered work of Vincent van Gogh. In the case of questions by the press, we will refer to you for the content of our report. If you decide to bring out the results of the report out into the open, we have no



objection, but we would like to know this in advance, so we can address the press ourselves appropriately - when being asked.

We trust that this information is helpful.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "m. vellekoop", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Marije Vellekoop
Head of Collections and Research



Art Historical Report

ATR-006857

Auvers

oil on canvas, 91.4 x 91.4 cm,

private collection

Verso: handwritten label attached to the stretcher with the following text: 'Propriétaire: Jonas Netter/ 'Vincent van Gogh - Auvers 1890' (figs. 1 & 2). The name 'Vincent' is also written on the back of the canvas, with a vaguely visible '1890' below it (fig. 3).



The painting *Auvers* is not included in any of the oeuvre catalogues of Vincent van Gogh. According to reports of the owner and the scholarly opinion of Dr. Michael P. Mezzatesta it is a so far unknown, and now re-discovered painting attributed to Vincent van Gogh.¹ Our comments on their arguments are given below, segmented under the headings: provenance, motif, materials used, technique and style, and signature.

Provenance

As far as we know, the history of the painting *Auvers* does not go back to Van Gogh or his family. The work is not mentioned in his letters, nor described in any of the family documents. In fact, its provenance is difficult to trace. We also do not know when it was discovered; it seems to have been acquired by the present owner only very recently, namely in 2021, together with thirteen paintings attributed to other artists. It is suggested by the works themselves that they were at some point looted by the Nazis, because nine of them, including *Auvers*, bear stamps on the stretcher of an eagle above a swastika (fig. 4).² The handwritten label on the back, with the name of the owner Jonas Netter (1867-1946), appears to be old (fig. 2), but whether this Jewish businessman and Paris based collector of modern art did actually own this picture, or any of all the other ones, as is suggested in the brochure *Re-discovered Masterpieces*, is difficult to determine with certainty.³ At least, no documents have been provided to make this suggestion likely, or better, a hard fact.

Netter's collection mainly consisted of paintings by Modigliani, Soutine, Utrillo, Kisling, Valadon, and several other artists active in the first decennia of the 20th century, most of whom Netter also knew personally.⁴ He is not known to have ever owned a Van Gogh picture, and the well-known late nineteenth century impressionists seemed to have been out of his league when he started collecting

¹ In the following we have based ourselves on the information provide to us by the current owner, consisting of the brochure *Re-discovered Masterpieces*, the *Scholarly opinion* of Dr. Michael P. Mezzatesta, dated 30 April 2021, and a separate *Report*, with no author or date mentioned.

² "These recently discovered fourteen paintings were exported from Nazi Germany or France", see *Re-discovered Masterpieces*, op. cit. (note 1), p. 3. The date of acquisition was communicated to us as 3 January 2021.

³ It is suggested that all paintings were part of Jonas Netter's collection, although only the 'Auvers' painting has a direct reference to Netter, see *Re-discovered Masterpieces* (note 1), p. 3.

⁴ For Netter's collection, see See Marc Restellini, *La collection Jonas Netter: Modigliani, Soutine et l'aventure de Montparnasse*, Paris 2012.



around 1915.⁵ Puzzling is also the fact that Netter, although being Jewish and living in Paris during the German Occupation, had sold most of his collection already before the second World War, and what remained in his possession does not seem to have been confiscated by the Nazis. In fact, his only two children never knew much about his collecting activities, and ‘thanks to excellent false documents, he led a quasi-clandestine life’ during the occupation.⁶ In the archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, responsible for the looting of Jewish property in occupied Paris, there is no reference to him, nor does he appear to have claimed any lost artworks after the war.⁷ Furthermore, we lack any information on the whereabouts of the collection between the alleged moment of confiscation by the Nazis and its recent acquisition by the current owner; no information has been provided by the owner where they come from.

With the above in mind, it becomes difficult to explain the Nazi stamps on the paintings. There are even two on the back of *Auvers* (fig. 1 & 4), and similar ones on the back of eight other works. They all appear crude and vague, while the text is completely illegible, which is strange. In the brochure these stamps are without any hesitation described as a ‘Nazi government export seal’,⁸ but the falsifying of Nazi stamps was already a widely spread activity during the war, and we think it would be wise to have these stamps researched by fully acknowledged experts in this field.

⁵ Although Netter owned some smaller works by Corot, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir and Signac, the impressionists were ‘hors de sa portée financière’ (out of his financial reach), see Restellini 2012, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 11, 18. ‘Netter admired the wonderful and popular impressionists of the late nineteenth century, but they had become too expensive’, according to Stanley Meiser, *Shocking Paris: Soutine, Chagall and the Outsiders of Montparnasse*, London 2015, p. 26. From all the other artists mentioned in the brochure *Re-discovered Masterpieces*, op. cit. (note 1), Manet, Pissarro, Monet, Degas, Cézanne, Claus, Klimt, Derain, Braque and Kirchner, only Derain appears to have been represented with three works in Netter’s collection, not with a harbour scene, but with ‘a male nude, a still life, and a figure painting’ (‘un nu, une nature morte, et une figure’), see G.J. Gros, ‘Les grands collectionneurs. Chez M. J. Netter’, in *L’Art Vivant*, no 97, January 1929, pp. 14-15, reproduced in Restellini 2012, op. cit. (note 4), p. 18.

⁶ ‘Sous la Occupation, il reste vivre à Paris. Grâce à des vrais faux papiers, il mène une existence quasi-clandestine’, see Restellini 2012, op. cit. (note 4), p. 11. Netter never used his first name Jonas, and was known as either ‘Jones’ or ‘Jean’ Netter, *idem*, p. 13.

⁷ For the cultural plunder of the Einsatzstab Rosenberg, see the website <https://www.errproject.org/>.

⁸ *Re-discovered Masterpieces*, op. cit. (note 1), p. 3.



It is a mystery why a wax seal with the sign of the Holy Cross interlaced with the letter 'M' was at some point added to the stretcher (figs. 1 & 5). It is the emblem of 'Saint Mary under the Cross', also called the 'Miracle Medal', and goes back to the visions of the nun Cathérine Labouré (1806-1876), who during one of her visions in 1830 was ordered to coin a medal with this design, which she did two years later (fig. 6). In 1947 she was beatified as Sainte Cathérine Labouré by pope Pius XII. The symbol itself is far from exceptional and widely known in the catholic world, so in this particular situation, the wax seal is impossible to connect to any individual person, or institute for that matter.

Motif

Although the handwritten label attached to the stretcher describes the location of the landscape as 'Auvers', this cannot be the case. The painted view is not even remotely reminiscent of the village and surroundings of Auvers-sur-Oise where the artist spent the last two months of his life (figs. 7-9). First of all, the village never had a weirdly curved road that crosses the railway at two different locations. Furthermore, the railway station has never changed much over the years, and has nothing in common with the one in the painting (fig. 10), and perhaps most notably, Auvers stretches out along the north bank of the river Oise for about 4.5 kilometers, so one would at least expect the river Oise present in any wide angled bird's eye view perspective, but it failed to make the painting.

The particular viewpoint leads to another problem: it is simply impossible to take up such a high position anywhere near Auvers, except way up in the air with a helicopter. There are no mountains in the area, which also means that the bare rock formation on the horizon is just as unfitting to the actual site as the rest of the image. In fact, the view is not reminiscent of any site Van Gogh visited in France in the last four years of his life. In addition, the combination of treeless, barren mountains from the ground onwards, fertile wheatfields without any green bushes, and trees only present along road paths, makes it very likely that the view depicted is a fantasized, fictional landscape.



Materials used

According to Dr. Mezzatesta, *Auvers* is 'painted on a coarse burlap canvas consistent with those used by Van Gogh late in his career'.⁹ However, he is mistaken. Without saying this in so many words, he refers to Van Gogh's documented and unique use of burlap/jute in Arles, in the fall of 1888, when Gauguin visited him. It was the latter who bought a 20 meter long piece of jute, 'toile à voile' (sailcloth) as Van Gogh called it, which they both used up within two months' time.¹⁰ The weave pattern of the rough canvas of *Auvers* is completely different from the type used by both artists in Arles (fig. 11 & 12), and in addition to this we would also like to point out that Van Gogh never painted on such a coarse canvas again.¹¹ In Auvers-sur-Oise Van Gogh almost exclusively used readymade pre-primed canvasses from rolls he ordered in Paris, and the exceptions are not comparable to the burlap of the painting in question.

Furthermore, *Auvers* measures 91.4 x 91.4 cm, and this non-standard square format has no parallel in his entire oeuvre. In fact, the use of square formats is somewhat exceptional in Van Gogh's oeuvre, and in Auvers limited to a couple of heads, a still life and a garden view, all done on a modest scale, c. 50 x 50 cm.¹²

Style & technique

Dr. Mezzatesta was struck by 'the draftmanship, rich impasto and unique colour or palette' of the painting, which in his view were 'instantly recognizable as the work of Van Gogh', but he does not really go into detail, and loosely compares the painting with seven Van Gogh paintings from Arles, and only two from Auvers. However, we note that there is very little variety in brushstrokes. The wheatfields were muddled together with a mix of colours in a straight linear fashion, which resulted in an overall naïve patchwork design of angular shaped plots of land. The simplistic buildings bordering the roads and fields were rendered in a lifeless daubing manner, with a curious multicolour mix of blue, red, green, orange or

⁹ See *Scholarly opinion*, op. cit. (note 1), p. 1.

¹⁰ Letter 721, 19 November 1888. Gauguin called it 'toile à sac', sack-cloth, letter 716, 1 or 2 November 1888. See also D. Druick, P. Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin. The Studio of the South*, exh. cat. Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago), Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), 2002, pp. 361-69.

¹¹ Pigment research has not been done, but if a separate, technical report will be made by acknowledged experts, we are of course prepared to judge the outcomes of it.

¹² For instance F 786 JH 2036, F 764 JH 2045, F 785 JH 2057, and F 756 JH 2029.



white walls, with either red, blue or yellow roofing. In our opinion there could hardly be a starker contrast between this way of painting and Van Gogh's lively, varied, often clear graphical brushwork, with a wealth of individually recognizable brushstrokes, and his focus on colour harmonies and contrasts.

This becomes even more evident when *Auvers* is placed next to a painting like *View of les Vessenots, Auvers* (figs. 14-16), which may very well function as a *pars pro toto* of Van Gogh's late style in Auvers. The houses in this painting, for instance, are not square boxes, but were constructed with diagonal brushstrokes for the roofs, straight strokes for the walls, in a further undulating style following the structure of the buildings themselves; not by squeezing in some colour between straight dark contours as in *Auvers*. Note the loose, freely and speedily executed fields in the foreground, with wavy lines and pointillist touches of yellow for the numerous flowers, and the variation between thicker and smaller brushstrokes to distinguish the foreground from the middle and background: the contrast with the stiff, hardly variable brushwork of *Auvers* could not be larger. And lastly, the way the trees were painted, says it all: in *Auvers*, Van Gogh developed a habit to paint trees in the distance by simply grouping curly brushstrokes into a closed rounded shape, whereas the trees lining the roads in the *Auvers* painting show no such circular structure at all; instead they were depicted as spidery skeletons with thin brown trunks and randomly placed splashes of green for foliage.

From what we further know of Van Gogh's working practice in Auvers, there is also an anomaly in the choice of format and subject matter, in combination with the type of canvas used by the maker of *Auvers*. In the case of ambitious, large pictures, Van Gogh almost exclusively used readymade pre-primed canvasses from rolls he ordered in Paris, and typical for the Auvers-period, if he wanted to stress the expanse of a landscape, he opted for a so-called 'double-square' format: 50 x 100 cm.

Furthermore, if *Auvers* is a wholly imagined, fantasized view, it has no parallel in Van Gogh's oeuvre, and if it is based to some extent on reality, which we think is very unlikely, as mentioned above, it has nothing in common with his kind of realism, which is grounded on working in front of the motif and much more true to life, also in terms of the perspective used. We know that there are some paintings by his hand in which he seems to have made use of a similar, fantasized high-up view. The first one is a painting from Arles, *Le canal Roubine du roi* (fig. 13), but although it looks as if the spectator hovers over the canal, the motif was studied with both feet flat on the ground. The effect Van Gogh aimed for was a



close up of the canal, looking downwards in front of the motif (on top of the bank of this canal just outside the city), while he depicted a topographically correct horizon above it, looking straight forward. Thus he deliberately flattened the perspective, for which he had found inspiration in Japanese woodblock prints.¹³ Unlike *Auvers* the motif is thus not shown from high up in the air, and the same is true for two small Saint-Rémy paintings from high vantage points, a view of a valley (fig. 17) and an olive grove (fig. 18). Although he may have exaggerated the steepness a little in both works, they are painted from a spot he could reach, in the mountains of the Alpilles that border Saint-Rémy.

Signature

In Dr. Mezzatesta's view the signature "Vincent" on the back of the canvas is 'in an entirely credible hand' and the hardly visible date "1890" appears to him 'rendered in the fugitive walnut brown ink typical of many of van Gogh's drawings' (fig. 3). Firstly, Van Gogh's signature is easily forged, and over the years we came across many examples. Besides this, Van Gogh never used a fugitive walnut brown ink for his drawings, but black inks that tended to fade over time to brownish tints due to the exposure to light, a circumstance hardly applicable to the verso of a painting. And lastly, not only was Van Gogh generally speaking reluctant in signing his work, it was certainly not his habit to sign and/or date his paintings on the back of a canvas.

Conclusion

In our opinion *Auvers* is not an authentic painting by Vincent van Gogh. None of the conclusions in the separate headings above point to Van Gogh as the author of *Auvers*. The provenance does not lead back to the artist, his family, friends or acquaintances; the view has nothing in common with *Auvers*, nor have we found parallels in style and technique in Van Gogh's oeuvre, or in the canvas that was used, while the signature on the back, in view of the above, cannot be by him.

Teio Meedendorp, Louis van Tilborgh - Senior Researchers

July 2021

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

¹³ See T. Meedendorp, 'Van Gogh's topography - (a little bit) true to nature', in T.J. Standring, L. van Tilborgh, *Becoming Van Gogh*, exh. cat. Denver (Denver Art Museum), 2012, pp. 89-117, esp. pp. 108-9.

Illustrations



Fig. 1 - Verso of *Auvers*.

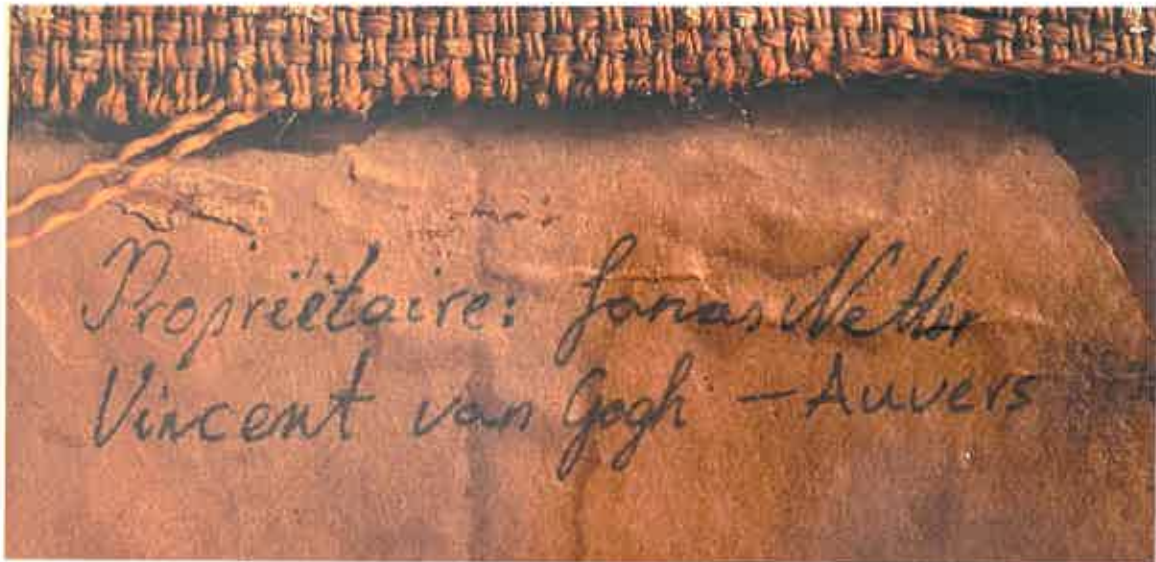


Fig. 2 - Label on the stretcher. Note the apparently very well preserved canvas, a coarse burlap with a horizontally as well as vertically double threaded weave pattern.

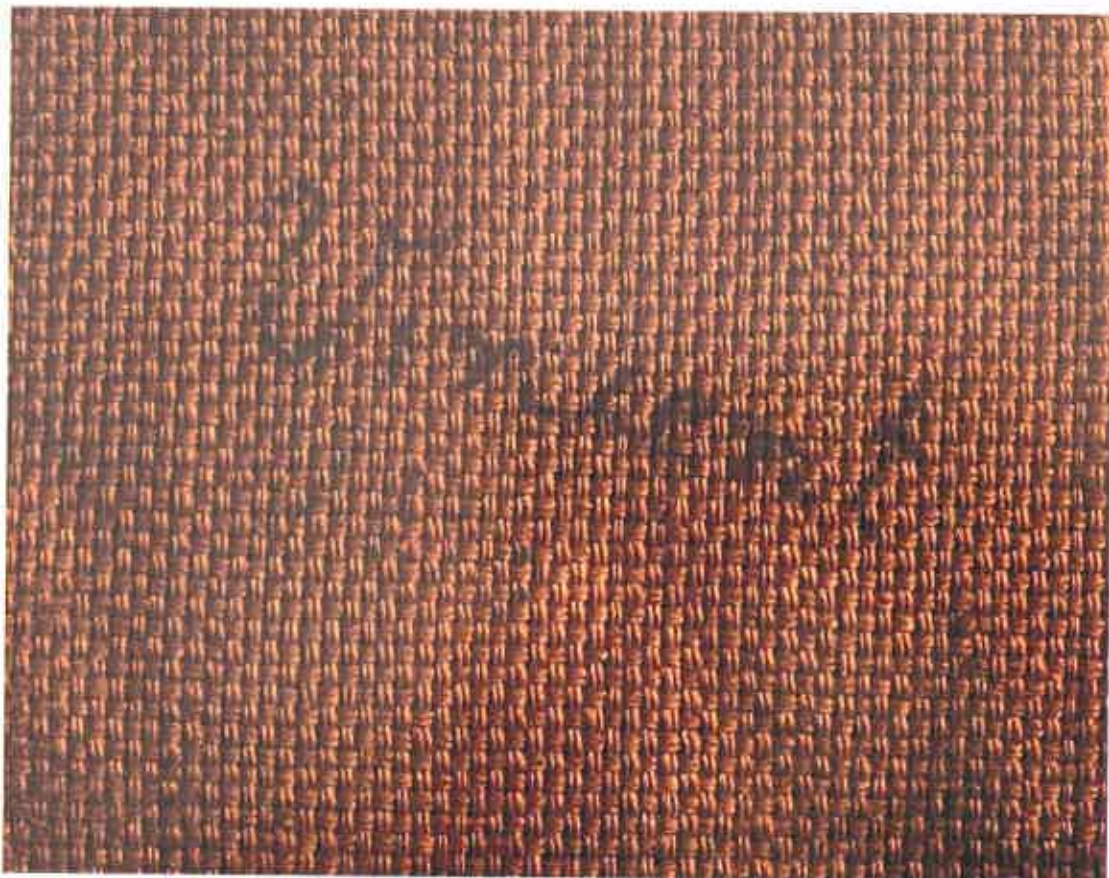


Fig. 3 - Detail of the verso with a signature 'Vincent' and only vaguely visible below '1890'.



Fig. 4 - Stamp showing the *Reichsadler* with an illegible text - on the stretcher of *Auvers*.



fig. 5 - Wax seal on the stretcher, showing the emblem of the Miracle Medal of Sainte Cathérine Labouré.



Fig. 6 - The Miracle Medal of Sainte Cathérine Labouré.



Fig. 7 - Auvers-sur-Oise, detail Google maps, satellite view.



Fig. 8 - Auvers c. 1860

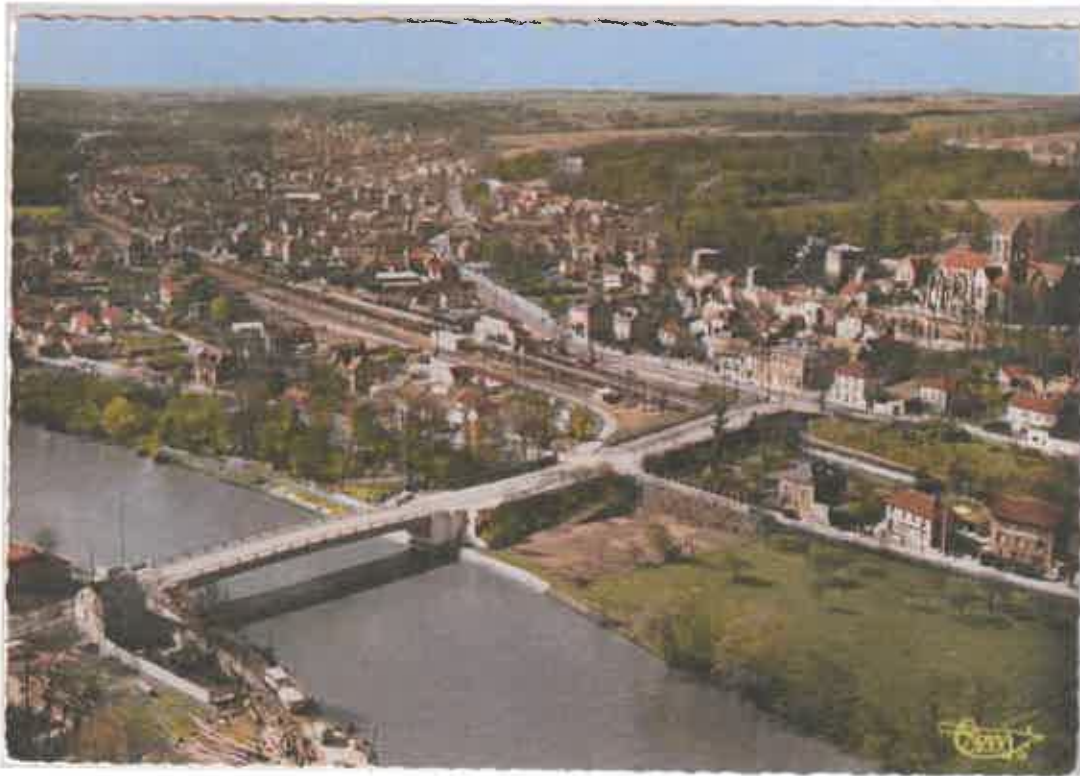


Fig. 9 - Panoramic view of Auvers-sur-Oise, with the Oise river in the foreground and the railway station in the center, postcard 1960's.



Fig. 10 - Postcard railway station Auvers, c. 1900



Fig. 11 - Detail of fig. 2: note the apparently very well preserved canvas, a coarse burlap with a horizontally as well as vertically double threaded weave pattern.



Fig. 12 - Enlarged detail of the lower left edge of Van Gogh's painting *Gauguin's chair*, November 1888 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), painted on jute. Note the single thread weave pattern.



Fig. 13 - Vincent van Gogh, *Le canal Roubine du roi*, June 1888, oil on canvas, 74 x 60 cm, private collection.



Fig. 14 - Vincent van Gogh, *View of les Vessenots, Auvers*, June 1890, 55 x 65 cm, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



Fig. 15 - detail fig. 14.



Fig. 16 - Detail *Auvers*



Fig. 17 - Vincent van Gogh, *Landscape with house and ploughman*, October 1889, oil on canvas, 33 x 41 cm, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



Fig. 18 - Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees on a Hill Side*, October 1889, 33.4 x 40.2 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam